TO EXIT WITH GRACE
Luke 3:15-22
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Retirement isn't everything that it is cracked up to be. That's at least one conclusion to draw from the curious story of John the Baptist which is woven into the early phase of the Gospel narrative. John said he wanted to retire but his behavior show that he couldn't bring himself to do it; not completely at least. He saw himself as the forerunner of Israel's Messiah. He announced that the time was at hand; that the Messiah would appear and that His effect on the nation would be dramatic, like the process of winnowing: using a pitch fork apparatus, the stocks of grain are tossed into the air, the kernels drop to the winnowing floor; the chaff blows away, is collected and burned. "That," said John,"is going to happen around here when the Messiah comes and when it begins I'm going to retire, sit back and enjoy it."

When John saw Jesus he thought he was looking at the Messiah. The text this morning suggests that he baptized Jesus and witnessed the very experience in which Jesus himself began to understand His role as Messiah. Clearly, John's forerunning days were over. It was time to retire. But he couldn't and he didn't, and his exit is not exactly graceful. An essay on John the Baptist by John Bodo suggested to me that the ambiguity of retirement is one of the things this strange character has to teach us. (A Gallery of New Testament Rogues, John R. Bodo).

Retirement affects people differently. Our brother, Art Romig, has retired, at latest count, four times. It doesn't seem to change him much. Mohammed Ali retired after every fight. For the first several years of retirement my Railroader Grandfather religiously set the alarm clock for 5:30 a.m. for the simple joy of turning it off and going back to sleep. Gail Sheehy, in her best seller, Passages, tells the story of the advertising executive who retired at fifty-five in order to be a writer, but carried his tie around in his pocket just in case. Each of us knows a number of stories like that: some funny, good, healthy; others sad, poignant: stories about vital men and women who are bored, drinking too much, driving one another crazy, getting in one another's hair because nothing in life has prepared them for that much time together; and - too frequently - dying prematurely because, one suspects, there is no particular reason for life to go on any longer.

I picked up a book this week by a Syracuse University psychologist, Retirement - A Time to Live Anew, in which the author suggests that there are always two feelings present at a retirement party for a business executive. There is always someone present who is happy at the opportunity to move up the ladder and take the retiree's place. And there is always someone present who is sure that an era is over, but that no one will ever be able to replace him or her. The author also suggests that the average "enjoyment time" for executives is about two months. After that a process called "retirement shock" sets in which runs the gamut of anger, resentment, blame, frantic fun, depression, boredom - and then, one hopes, recovery, health and new life.

For the moment, however, let's go back to the Scripture and take a longer look at the strange man whose career suggests that retirement isn't what it's cracked up to be. Luke suggests that John and Jesus were related, distant cousins. Jesus' mother Mary, and John's mother Elizabeth are called "kinswomen" by Luke. We know nothing about him until the beginning of the story of Jesus' ministry when John plays a major role. It had been four hundred years since anyone had spoken in Israel like John. Clearly modeling his public posture on the strong prophetic figures of Elijah, Amos and Micah, John denounced immorality and hypocrisy. He was a strange and frightening figure, living in the desert, eating wild honey and locusts. People were obviously fascinated: they listened; they repented; and they permitted John to baptize them. John also told them that he was simply the forerunner; that there was one coming after him much greater - the Messiah himself.

There is a lot of interesting scholarly speculation about John the Baptist. It has been suggested, for instance, that at the death of his elderly parents, John was adopted by one of the religious communities which were thriving at the time. These communities, best known of which was the Essenes, were a type of pre-Christian monastery. Rigidly moral, legalistic, community members lived in the desert, structuring their life around the ceremonial, diet and cleanliness laws of scripture, practicing ritual bathing - a kind of baptism. They ate only the available food of the desert, practiced celibacy and therefore sustained themselves by adopting orphans and fervently believed that the Messianic Age was about to begin. It is entirely speculative but much about John the Baptist suggests that he was reared and lived in such a community.

What interests me about John the Baptist this morning, however, is that he announced his retirement but couldn't quite go through with it. Perhaps he really did believe that the Messiah would root out immorality and hypocrisy and restore the nation's dignity and honor. Perhaps he really did believe that forerunners could sit back and enjoy the show when the Messiah came. Whatever he felt, a short time after the encounter with Jesus, John begins to act and sound like a man who doesn't want to retire. His disciples are arguing with Jesus' disciples. Apparently Jesus doesn't look and act like the kind of Messiah John thought he was forerunning. He equivocated on retiring; kept an active group of disciples around him, waited in the wings watching, just in case he was needed some more, and finally, from prison, sent a delegation to ask Jesus, flat out, "Are you the one, or should we watch for another?" Jesus answered that question patiently and gently by pointing out how He was conducting His ministry. And when John is finally beheaded by Herod for his impertinence, the narrative, in a poignant phrase, reports that Jesus withdrew "in a boat to a lonely place".

I think Jesus felt great affection for John, was loyal to him, respected his ethical position, and while not agreeing with John's methods, was profoundly touched by the tragedy of his early death. I can't help but think that Jesus the man, in a terribly immediate sense, saw in John's story, a picture of the way His society dealt with the truth of God when a man decided to speak it. He is, I find, a very human character, eccentric, curious, mixed-up, ambivalent, courageous - and finally, as is the case with so many of us, incapable of exiting with grace.

In the essay I cited earlier John Bodo holds that "Every retirement is a mini-death. For anyone accustomed to center stage, it is hard enough to step aside, even a few paces. To exit - into the wings - is a form of dying." (p.23). We know, existentially, that retirements are not easy and often painful. That's why Gail Sheehy's book Passages was a best seller. Life, we all know experientially, is a series of retirements, of endings and beginnings, of transitions, or passages. Retirement at sixty-five or so is one of them, but certainly not the only one, and there is a sense in which the way one negotiates the earlier passages will determine how the one at sixty-five is handled. They all hurt. Each one is accompanied by at least some resentment. Hungarian poet Endre Ady gave words to a lot of retirement banquet sentiments in a poem entitled "He Who Shall Take My Place."

"Let him who takes my place be accursed!
Let poison drip on his tongue!
Let his eyes be darkened!
Let his heart beat stop!
Blindly let him grope about!
And if he can find a woman
Let him fail to satisfy her!" (Bodo, p.24).

Strong medicine, but retirement for many people sounds like the end of life. Some of us have our first taste of it when we can't let go of adolescence and become young adults. And some of us keep extending young adult far past the point of reason because

middle age sounds so ancient. And proverbial middle age is whatever you are. At another level it is difficult to let go of authority once you have tested it, and esteem and respect. I've known retired military officers who were unable to cope with the loss civilians. It is difficult to be a parent whose children not long ago adored and obeyed but who now not only don't take one's advice but refuse even to listen to it.

Every retirement is, or can be, difficult, but none quite so much as that retirement at the age of sixty-five. In very recent years we have begun to think about it, and argue about it and change it a bit. The Ohio Supreme Court, last Wednesday, ruled again against forced retirement. The whole topic of aging is finally receiving much attention and we are finding ourselves forced to rethink some basic assumptions which were once unquestioned. Satchle Paige, legendary baseball pitcher, once asked knowingly, "How old would you be if you didn't know how old you was?" (Garson Kanin, It Takes a Long Time to Become Young). But, the fact is that our society has bought a definition of aging and set of stereotypes about the elderly, retirement age, which have us strongly in their grip; powerful definitions in terms of the effect on our life.

It began, interestingly enough, in 1881 when German Chancelor, Otto von Bismark, created the first social security system to combat socialism, and chose sixty-five as the age the benefits could commence. I found that information in a very edifying and very funny book by playwright Garson Kanin, It Takes A Long Time to Become Young. Kanin points out that Bismark is the culprit, and that he chose sixty-five because his data showed that not many Germans would live longer. Kanin suggests that Bismark's initial genius and his logic would dictate, according to today's data, a retirement age over one hundred

Obviously, for some people, retirement at sixty-five is the most liberating event in all of life. We all know people who thrive on it. The mistake we have made is in the stereotype that everyone feels that way, and that most people are past the point of productive living by that age anyway. That is so atrociously false that we simply must alter it. The data simply won't support it. Artists, writers, scholars, for instance, can't be forced to quit at sixty-five. Eubie is still playing very well. Creativity doesn't retire. Somerset Maugham was writing at ninety-two, P.G.Wodehouse published a good comic novel several weeks before his death at ninety-three. Five years ago the smash hit of the London Theatre season was a sex farce by Ben Travers, "The Bed Before Yesterday". Mr. Travers was eighty-nine at the time. Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, Archibald MacLeish wrote the best poetry our country has produced in their 80's. A list of creative genius showing itself after the age of retirement would include Matisse, Picasso, Roualt, Michelangelo, daVinci, Chagall, Freud, Einstein, Schwietzer, Edison, Whitehead. (Ibid, Kanin).

Several days after his inauguration as President in 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt paid a courtesy call on Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., ninety-two years old. He found Holmes in his library, reading a book of Plato. After pleasant small talk the President said, "May I ask why you're reading Plato, Mr. Justice?" And Justice Holmes replied, "Certainly, Mr. President. To improve my mind." (Ibid, Kanin).

Garson Kanin from whose book I have borrowed heavily, and which I recommend highly, said it well: "Youth is a gift of nature: age is a work of art." (p.4).

We are learning that our assumptions about aging were not very sound: that they had more to do with Bismark's sociology and economics budget than medical fact; that sixty-five is no more suitable for retirement as a rule, than seventy-five or forty-five. We are learning that vigor does not have to abate, that love, passion, enthusiasm, physical and mental stimulation and responsiveness are not tied to the Social Security System, and that in much of life, youth can't hold a candle to maturity, experience, age.

A recent University of California study shows that the most socially concerned and involved people are not college students as we expected - but the elderly. "The most politically active people in the United States are grandmothers." (See Martin Marty, Context, 3/15/79).

There are, however, passages, transitions, retirements. There is no sense disguising or minimizing it. All of us will have to exit some day - from our professions and the way of life they represent. To cling, to hold on too long, too tightly, can be deadly. There are times to let go, as John the Baptist's story suggests; not of life, but of tasks, responsibilities, priorities, in order to move on to others. Our faith, in fact, our resurrection theology, can - I believe - be very helpful. John Bodo writes, "Surrender of status, of power, of life itself, can be a step up rather than down...Christian faith furnishes us with a perfect model of the paradox of victory through self surrender." (p.26).

That doesn't mean that we should sheepishly lay down the symbols of vital life itself when we retire from work. On the contrary, it means that retirement can be the opportunity to confront the truth, perhaps for the first time, that who we are - our dignity, worth and meaning as persons are not related to our job or the responsibilities we carry, but to something far more important; namely, the love of our Creator. We don't have to cling desperately to the esteem, status and responsibilities of our jobs. Jesus Christ showed an entirely different possibility: a model of receiving by letting go; an example of happiness through making others happy, of freedom in obedience of victory in defeat, of life - even in the midst of death.

His life, which revealed so transparently the love of God, demonstrated the good news of the Gospel: that we are free to exit, with grace: to negotiate the many retirements of our lives without life - threatening anxiety, to live thoroughly each moment given to us, to work hard - giving ourselves to the tasks and people and causes which are important to us, and to step on - when the time comes, with freedom and grace and humor; secure because of His love - to exit with grace.

Amen.

God of our lives, we thank you for time, for the privilege of growing older, the experience and wisdom of our years. God our Father, stand with us in our retirements; give us the grace to let go when we should. Surround us with Your love, now and forever. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.